

Lady Alicia's Emeralds

A Decidedly Pleasant Story of an Amateur Detective

By ROBERT BARR

MANY Englishmen, if you speak to them of me, indulge themselves in a detraction which I hope they will not mind my saying is not graced by that delicacy of innuendo with which some of my own countrymen attempt to diminish whatever merit I may possess. Mr. Spenser Hale, of Scotland Yard, whose lack of imagination I have so often endeavoured to amend—alas! without perceptible success—was good enough to say after I had begun these reminiscences, which he read with affected scorn, that I was wise in setting down my successes, because the life of Methuselah himself would not be long enough to chronicle my failures, and the man to whom this was said replied that it was only my artfulness, a word of which these people are very fond; that I intended to use my successes as bait, issue a small pamphlet filled with them, and then record my failures in a thousand volumes, after the plan of a Chinese Encyclopædia, and sell these to the public on the instalment plan.

Ah, well, it is not for me to pass comment on such observations. Every profession has its little jealousies, and why should the coterie of detection be exempt? I hope I may never be led to follow an example so deleterious, and thus be tempted to express my contempt for the stupidity with which the official detective system of England is imbued. I have had my failures, of course. Have I pretended to be otherwise than human? But what has been the cause of these failures? They have arisen through the conservatism of the English. When there is a mystery to be solved, the average Englishman almost invariably places it in the hands of the regular police. When these good people are utterly baffled; when their big boots have crushed out all evidence that the grounds may have had to offer to a discerning mind; when their clumsy hands have obliterated the clues which are everywhere around them, I am at last called in, and if I fail, they say—

"What could you expect: he is a Frenchman?"

This was exactly what happened in the case of Lady Alicia's emeralds. For two months the regular police were not only befogged, but they blatantly sounded the alarm to every thief in Europe. All the pawnbrokers' shops of Great Britain were ransacked, as if the robber of so valuable a collection would be foolish enough to take it to a pawnbroker! Of course, the police say that they thought the thief would dismantle the clustet and sell the gems separately. But the necklace of emeralds possessing, as it did, an historical value which is probably in excess of its intrinsic worth, what more natural than that the holder of it should open negotiations with its rightful owner and thus make more money by quietly restoring it than by its dismemberment and sale piecemeal? But such a fuss was kicked up; such a furor created, that it was no wonder the receiver of the goods lay low and said nothing. In vain were all ports giving access to the Continent watched: in vain were the police of France, Belgium, and Holland warned to look out for this treasure. Two valuable months were lost, and then the Marquis of Blair sent for me. I maintain that the case was hopeless at the moment I took it up.

It may be asked why the Marquis of Blair allowed the regular police to blunder along for two precious months, but anyone who is acquainted with that nobleman will not wonder that he clung so long to a forlorn hope. Very few members of the House of Peers are richer than Lord Blair, and still fewer more penurious. He maintained that as he paid his taxes, he was entitled to protection from theft; that it was the duty of the Government to restore the gems, and if it could not do that, to make compensation for them. This theory is not acceptable in the English Courts, and while Scotland Yard did all it could during those two months, what but failure could have been expected from its limited mental equipment?

When I arrived at the Manor of Blair, as his lordship's very ugly and somewhat modern mansion house is termed, I was instantly admitted to his presence. I had been summoned from London by a letter in his lordship's own hand, on which the postage was not paid. It was late in the afternoon when I arrived, and our first conference was what might be termed futile. It was taken up entirely with haggling about terms, the Marquis endeavouring to beat down the price of my services to a sum so insignificant that it would barely have paid my expenses from London to Blair and back. Such

bargaining is intensely distasteful to me. When the Marquis found all his offers declined with a politeness which left no opening for anger on his part, he endeavoured to induce me to take up the case on a commission contingent upon my recovery of the gems, and as I declined this for the twentieth time, darkness came on, and the gong rang for dinner.

I dined alone in a *salle a manger* which appeared to be set apart for those calling at the mansion on business, and the meagreness of the fare strengthened my determination to return to London as early as possible next morning. When the repast was finished, the dignified serving-man said gravely to me—

"The Lady Alicia asks if you will be good enough to give her a few moments in the drawing-room, sir."

I followed the man to the drawing-room, and found the young lady seated at the piano, on which she was strumming idly and absent-mindedly, but with a touch, nevertheless, that indicated advanced excellence in the art of music. She was not dressed as one who had just risen from the dining-table, but was somewhat primly and commonly attired, looking more like a cottager's daughter than a member of a great county family. Her head was small, and crowned with a mass of jet-black hair. My first impression, on entering the large, rather dimly lighted room, was unfavourable; but that vanished instantly under the charm of a manner so graceful and vivacious that in a moment I seemed to be standing in a brilliant Parisian *salon* rather than in the sombre drawing-room of an English country house. Every poise of her dainty head, every gesture of those small, perfect hands, every modulated tone of the voice, whether sparkling with laughter, or caressing in confidential speech, reminded me of the *grandes dames* of my own land. It was strange to find this perfect human flower amidst the gloomy ugliness of a great square house built in the time of the Georges; but I remembered now that the Blairs are the English equivalent of the De Bellairs of France, from which family sprang the fascinating Marquise de Bellairs, who adorned the Court of Louis XIV. Here, advancing towards me, was the very reincarnation of the lovely Marquise who gave lustre to this dull world nearly three hundred years ago. Ah! after all, what are the English but a conquered race? I often forget this, and I trust I never remind them of it; but it enables one to forgive them much. A vivid twentieth-century Marquise was Lady Alicia in all except attire. What a dream some of our Parisian dress artists could have made of her! and here she was, immured in this dull English house in the high-necked costume of a labourer's wife!

"WELCOME, Monsieur Valmont!" she cried in French of almost faultless intonation. "I am so glad you have arrived"; and here she greeted me as if I were an old friend of the family. There was nothing of condescension in her manner, no display of her own affability, while at the same time teaching me my place and the difference in our stations of life. I can stand the rudeness of the nobility, but I detest their condescension. No—Lady Alicia was a true De Bellairs, and in my confusion, bending over her slender hand, I said—

"Madame la Marquise, it is my privilege to extend to you my most respectful salutations."

She laughed at this quietly, with the melting sound of the nightingale.

"Monsieur, you mistake my title. Although my uncle is a marquis, I am but Lady Alicia."

"Your pardon, my lady. For the moment I was back in that scintillating Court which surrounded Louis le Grand."

"How flatteringly you introduce yourself, monsieur! In the gallery upstairs there is a painting of the Marquise de Bellairs, and when I show it to you to-morrow, you will then understand how you have pleased a vain woman by your reference to that beautiful lady. But I must not talk in this frivolous strain, monsieur. There is serious business to be considered; and, I assure you, I looked forward to your coming with the eagerness of sister Anne on the tower of Bluebeard."

I fear my expression, as I bowed to her, must have betrayed my gratification at hearing these words so confidentially uttered from lips so sweet, while the glance of her lovely eyes was even more

eloquent than her words. Instantly I felt ashamed of my chaffering over terms with her uncle; instantly I forgot my resolution to depart on the morrow; instantly I resolved to be of what assistance I could to this dainty lady. Alas, the heart of Valmont is to-day as unprotected against the artillery of inspiring eyes as ever it was in his extreme youth!

"This house," she continued, vivaciously, "has been practically in a state of siege for two months. I could take none of my usual walks in the gardens, on the lawns, or through the park, without some clumsy policeman in uniform crashing his way through the bushes, or some detective in plain clothes accosting and questioning me under the pretence that he was a stranger who had lost his way. The lack of all subtlety in our police is something deplorable. I am sure the real criminal might have passed through their hands a dozen times unmolested, while our poor, innocent servants and the strangers within our gates are made to feel that the stern eye of the Law is upon them night and day."

The face of the young lady was an entrancing picture of animated indignation as she gave utterance to this truism, which her countrymen are so slow to appreciate. I experienced a glow of satisfaction.

"Yes," she went on, "they sent down from London an army of stupid men, who have kept our household in a state of abject terror for eight long weeks, and where are the emeralds?"

AS she suddenly asked this question, with the most Parisian of accents, with a little outward spreading of the hands, a flash of the eye, and a toss of the head, the united effect was something indescribable through the limitations of the language I am compelled to use.

"Well, monsieur, your arrival has put to flight this tiresome brigade—if, indeed, the word 'flight' is not too airy a term to use towards a company so elephantine; and I assure you a sigh of relief has gone up from the whole household, with the exception of my uncle, and I told him at dinner to-night: 'If Monsieur Valmont had been induced to take an interest in the case at the first, the jewels would have been in my possession long before to-night!'"

"Ah, my lady," I protested, "I fear you overrate my poor ability. It is quite true that if I had been called in on the night of the robbery, my chances of success would have been infinitely greater than they are now."

"Monsieur," she cried, clasping her hands over her knees and leaning towards me, hypnotizing me with those starry eyes, "monsieur, I am perfectly confident that before a week is past you will restore the necklace, if such restoration is possible. I have said so from the first. Now, am I right in my conjecture, monsieur, that you come here alone—that you bring with you no train of followers and assistants?"

"That is as you have stated it, my lady."

"I was sure of it. It is to be a contest of trained mentality in opposition to our two months' experience of brute force."

Never before had I felt such ambition to succeed, and a determination not to disappoint took full possession of me. Appreciation is a needed stimulant, and here it was offered to me in its most fascinating form. Ah, Valmont, Valmont, will you never grow old? I am sure that at that moment, if I had been eighty, the same thrill of enthusiasm would have tingled at my fingers' ends. Leave the Manor of Blair in the morning? Not for the Bank of France!

"Has my uncle acquainted you with particulars of the robbery?"

"No, madam, we were talking of other things."

The lady leaned back in her low chair, partially closed her eyes, and breathed a deep sigh.

"I can well imagine the subject of your conversation," she said at last. "The Marquis of Blair was endeavouring to impose usurer's terms upon you, while you, nobly scorning such mercenary considerations, had perhaps resolved to leave us at the earliest opportunity."

"I assure you, my lady, that if any such conclusion had been arrived at on my part, it vanished the moment I was privileged to set foot in this drawing-room."

"It is kind of you to say that, monsieur; but you must not allow your conversation with my uncle to prejudice you against him. He is an old man